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ABSTRACT

In the past several decades, individuals have been responding more actively to political and personal pressures to identify with a specific group that shares their background. For many people of mixed racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage, making such an identification is complicated. It is important for society to foster the positive development of these individuals, and it is even more important for educators and counselors to know how best to serve the special developmental and educational needs of multiracial students. A key factor in the lives of multiracial children is how they are labeled by themselves, their families, and society in general. A model of the identity development of multiracial children and youth has been proposed by W. Poston (1990). This model suggests that families may foster identity choices for their children that encompass "human," "multiracial," and "monoracial" options. At present, many of the important official tallies of individuals in the United States allow for only one racial or ethnic designation. However, in the year 2000, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget will allow individuals to identify themselves with as many racial designations as appropriate. By 2003, schools will also have to change the ways in which students report race, and this may affect the way in which multiracial students see themselves. Individuals who are socialized as multiracial usually benefit from their heritage, but there are disadvantages to being multiracial. One of the disadvantages is the complicated nature of the identity development process for multiracial youth. Another pressure on multiracial youth is societal racism in general and bias against interracial marriage in particular. Given the existence of the

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prejudices, it is likely that educators and counselors will also harbor some of these ideas, even unconsciously. It is important that educators and counselors consider their personal views carefully to ensure that they do not further complicate the development of the multiracial student's identity. Learning about and respecting the beliefs, attitudes, and concerns of multiracial students is crucial for educators. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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DIGEST

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THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF MULTIRACIAL YOUTH

In the last several decades individuals have been responding more actively to political and personal pressures to identify with a specific group that shares their background. For the growing number of individuals of mixed racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage living in the U.S., deciding to make such an identification is complicated and sometimes problematic, although families ease this process for their children. Now, with more than 100,000 multiracial babies, representing a wide variety of ethnic mixes, being born annually (U.S. Bureau of the Census, cited in Root, 1996), it is also important for society in general to foster the positive development of these individuals by respecting and appreciating their distinctness.

It is even more essential for educators and counselors to know how best to serve the special developmental and educational needs of their multiracial students, and to devise the most appropriate means to support their families' efforts to nurture them.

The Multiracial Population

Individuals of mixed heritage usually identify themselves as "multiracial." Some, whose parents are each a different race, are actually biracial; others comprise all three races because their ancestors have intermarried multiply over generations, an increasingly common occurrence (Hall, 1996). Further, because the designation has expanded over the years, individuals of a variety of types of mixed heritage that include not only race, but ethnicity and culture, now also consider themselves multiracial. Thus, the following individuals of mixed backgrounds may identify themselves as multiracial: a Puerto Rican/Salvadorian, whose parents speak the same language, and may be of the same race, but who have different cultures because of their different countries of origin; and a Chinese/Japanese or an African/Caribbean, whose parents are of the same race but speak different languages and come from different countries.

Many monoracial children who were adopted by parents of a different race often consider themselves multiracial as they embrace the cultures of both their biological and adoptive parents. Indeed, the phenomenon of a "multiracial family" is growing in prominence as interracial, interethnic, and transnational adoptions increase.

This digest uses the term "multiracial" to indicate individuals of mixed racial, ethnic, or cultural ancestry. The discussion below demonstrates, however, that despite a common classification, great variations exist among members of the multicultural population, both in the way they perceive themselves and in the way they are treated by society.

Identity Formation in Multiracial Children

Racial and ethnic group differences have a significant impact on children's social development, although the impact varies with age and specific ethnicity. The role of heritage in a child's development is affected by history, as well as by social context and immediate environment. Since having a multiple ethnic heritage has a different, perhaps more problematic, effect on a child's development (Herring, 1992), it is important to actively help multiracial children acquire a positive self-concept. They need exposure to models of all the ethnicities they embrace and to multiracial people generally. They need to understand what it means to be multiracial, and to acquire culturally-linked coping skills that include ways to deal with racism and discrimination (Wardle, 1987). Because there are few integrated, stable, and tension-free racially mixed communities in the U.S. that can facilitate positive identity formation in interracial children (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994), families and schools must work hard to provide a supportive community that affirms multiracialism.

Classification

A key factor in the lives of multiracial children is how they are labeled—by themselves, their families, and society in general. In particular, for oppressed people, as many multiracial individuals consider themselves, labels are important vehicles for self-empowerment (Root, 1996). During the last 20 years, there has been an increase in the self-determination of interracial families; many have become active politically to ensure that they are accepted as a group with special concerns separate from other racial and ethnic populations (Wardle, 1987).

It is not surprising, then, for several alternative views regarding classification to exist within the multiracial community, for parents to choose different ways of identifying their children, and for youth themselves to spend a significant amount of time considering how they want to be identified. When children reach adolescence, many reconsider their identity. To avoid choosing between parents and peers, they may keep home separate from school. They may feel pressured by peers and teachers, the forms they must fill out, or even family, to choose a race. Frequently, they choose a single minority racial identification publicly, believing it is politically correct to do so, while privately still cherishing their multiracial heritage (Okun, 1996).

These societal pressures affect the natural internal process of developing an identity that all children undergo. Recently acknowledged by experts as unique for multiracial youth, the process has been described by one

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researcher (Poston, 1990) as a meshing of *personal identity* (including non-racial constructs such as self-esteem and interpersonal competence) with *reference group orientation* (constructs such as racial esteem and racial ideology). Complicating this integration for multiracial youth is the need to work though internal conflicts and guilt about having to develop an identity that may not incorporate all aspects of their heritage and to resist internalizing society's negative attitudes about multiracialism and minority status. Ultimately, according to the model, in the last stage, successful identity formation, or a satisfying feeling of wholeness, requires that multiracial youth appreciate and integrate all components of their heritage into their lives (Poston, 1990).

This model, while appearing to take account of all the stages of multiracial identity development, may not apply to all interracial individuals, however, since some interracial families foster identity choices for their children that do not conform to the model's final stage. In general, identity options for families comprise the following:

"Human." Some multiracial families oppose the concept of racial labeling altogether, classifying their members solely as human. In addition to seeking to simplify a possibly complicated process of listing all the components of their heritage, they argue that acceptance of any label—singular or multiple—other than "white" relegates them to a lower status, given existing racism (Pinderhughes, 1995). "Try calling [your children] by their names," says one parent (Mills, 1994, p. 10). While growing up in a race-based society may prevent these consciously non-labeled children from appreciating their family's attitudes until they are adults, they often eventually become better acculturated overall, identifying "with communities beyond the traditional racial group or even nation-state" (Weisman, 1996, p. 161).

"Multiracial." Other families, perhaps the majority currently, help their children develop a biracial or multiracial identity based on the components of their particular background. They believe that it is important for the children to take equal pride in all their heritages and to maintain equal connections with all members of their family. Some of these families also recognize that their children's appearance reflects their dual heritage, and they want the family's culture to embody that (Pinderhughes, 1995).

There are also individuals who consider themselves multiracial but do not identify themselves by every component of their heritage. They may not feel close to all or any part of their heritage, and they not have been exposed to one or all the components of it. Also, because their appearance in no way distinguishes them as a member of any of the individual groups they comprise, they may believe that they cannot claim identification with those groups (Stephan, cited Thornton, 1996). These people assert that the designation "multiracial" gives them membership in an entirely different community that is actually a new "race" or "ethnic group," and it is this group that evokes their feelings of solidarity (Weisman, 1996). The group's unique characteristic is that it is an amalgam of all the characteristics of other racial and ethnic groups, and its members are linked by the fact that each has multiple, albeit different, heritages. Concern has been raised that this approach to multiracialism cannot provide individuals with a sustained sense of community because the group's only commonality is the "ambiguous status" of its members, and such a tenuous connection is not enough to provide the emotional support that multiracial people need (Thornton, cited in Weisman, 1996, p. 157). Nevertheless, the existence of such a group (perhaps eventually to be legitimized as a category on some census forms, as discussed below) may be the most practical way of helping individuals develop an identity in the future. If the rate of cross-ethnic and cross-race marriages continues to grow, as is projected, over generations the number of components of an individual's heritage will increase significantly, making racial distinctions less and less possible.

"Monoracial." Still other families foster their children's identification with only one race. Single parents, especially, may opt to emphasize the culture of the own race because that is what they know best and because their children resemble them (Mills, 1994). Some parents of children with African ancestry may assume that society will consider the children black, and so they raise them as black in order to better prepare them for their treatment as such later in life (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996). In addition, society may urge that children identify with only the minority group in an effort to maintain the "racial purity" of whites. Conversely, some multiracial children may be urged to assume a white identity solely, on the assumption that if they can "pass" as white they can avoid experiencing racism (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994).

Documentation

Currently, many of the most important official tallies of individuals allow for only one racial or ethnic designation. These include the U.S. Census, which is used as a basis for race-based representation in government, program funding, and a variety of social services; and school forms, which are also used to determine program funding levels and which send a message about the value of a particular identity to the students filling them out. Many multiracial individuals assert that this policy is evidence of their exclusion from American society, a forced rejection of a part of their heritage, and a powerful negative influence on their self-concept. They believe that the lack of a "multiracial" category is an indication of society's rejection of them (Chiong, 1998).

There are also some people of color, however, who believe that identifying themselves as a single, specific minority shows unity and power (Chiong, 1998). In fact, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Council of La Raza, along with some Native American advocacy groups, have opposed a multiracial category, concerned that it could negatively affect voting rights enforcement and allocations for social and school programs based on minority participation (Sullivan, 1998).

Arguments on all sides notwithstanding, the 2000 census of the Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) will allow respondents to check as many racial designations as appropriate, although the agency rejected the recommendation to add a "multiracial" category. OMB is also mandating that by 2003 schools similarly amend their own forms, a change that will affect how more than two million students report their race (Chiong, 1998). Such changes may indicate that there are substan-

tially more multiracial people in the U.S. than previously thought, information that activists hope will encourage an increase in their acceptance and influence.

Advantages and Disadvantages of A Multiracial Background

Children of mixed racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage have both particular advantages and challenges. The factors that determine their ability to develop a cohesive and personally fulfilling identity include, obviously, personal qualities such as resilience and self-esteem. Equally important additional factors are family stability, attitudes, and behavior (extended as well as nuclear); community and school environment, including manifestations of either support or discrimination and ostracism; and the extent of the commonness of multiracial families in their neighborhood. Some of these factors affect the identity development of all children; and some affect the development of monoracial minority children as well as multiracial children.

Historically, it was believed that multiracial children must have more problems than other children because they "*must* choose" a race (Wilson, 1987, p. 7). It was also argued that since monoracialism is normal, multiracialism must be "deviant" and multiracial individuals are not "a perfect fit anywhere" (Thornton, 1996, p. 108). Ideas such as these usually resulted from research on individuals seeking help for problems, whether race-related or not, so well-adjusted members of the multiracial population did not become subjects for study and their ability to deal successfully with multiracialism went unrecorded (Thornton, 1996).

Advantages

Individuals who are socialized as multiracial usually benefit from their heritage. Their families provide them with a cultural education that is broader than that of monoracial children, giving them both a larger knowledge base and a more well-rounded sense of the world. They have an enhanced sense of self and identity, and greater intergroup tolerance, language facility, appreciation of minority group cultures, and ties to single-heritage groups than do monoracial people (Thornton, 1996). In addition, they often are able to identify multiple aspects of a situation where other people see only one, and to see both sides of a conflict (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993).

Disadvantages

As indicated, the identity development process for multiracial youth is more complicated than for monoracial youth, both because there are so many possible choices and because families, peers, and society in general can exert strong—and frequently contradictory—influences on youth who are already struggling with internal conflicts.

Another, and perhaps even more formidable pressure on multiracial youth, which can continue throughout their lives, is societal racism in general and discomfort with interracial marriages in particular. The racism visited upon people of color generally in the U.S. may be exacerbated by the strong prejudice of some people against mixing races through marriage and procreation (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994; Pinderhughes, 1995), and "blurring the physical categories upon which white status and power depend" (Wilson, 1987, p. 7). While blacks and whites intermarry at a lower rate than other groups, the families they create elicit the strongest negative reactions (Okun, 1996). Some people of color may also express reservations about intermarriage, believing that those who cross ethnic lines to marry are rejecting pride in their group, or that the political power of their own group will be decreased through blending (Wardle, 1992).

Given the existence of these prejudices in society generally, it is likely that educators and counselors harbor some of them as well, even unconsciously. Inevitably, multiracial students will perceive such attitudes, and internalize a negative image that compromises their sense of self and ability to succeed. Therefore, it is important for those working with multiracial children to carefully consider their personal views, particularly in light of the significant worth that students place on their approval. Educators and counselors need to convey love, support, and acceptance to multiracial students. They also must make it clear to all students that racist abuse cannot be tolerated in school (Wardle, 1987, 1992).

Sadly, the families of multiracial children sometimes reject them, and their mothers may even have ambivalent feelings toward them. Indeed, some very young multiracial children are given up by their parents who, feeling crushed by personal difficulties, become absolutely overwhelmed by the challenges of raising children who may have more than the usual complement of needs. Thornton (1996) cites a study of such children whose problems were then compounded by social service departments, which, not understanding the unique problems of multiracial children, placed them in inappropriate foster homes, again demonstrating how crucial it is for service providers to understand multiracialism.

Whether multiracial individuals are considered "minorities" and face the resulting discrimination depends largely on where they live and the extent to which their physical appearance differs from that of the majority of the local population. Moreover, given the existing racial hierarchy in the U.S. and elsewhere, multiracial individuals comprising different cultural mixes are likely to be treated differently. This will affect their self-perception, as it is impossible to avoid totally the internalization of society's judgments, even when recognized as both erroneous and destructive. As one Caucasian/African American put it, "[t]he social nature of the race concept ensures that we all will be *other* somewhere if only we travel far enough" (Weisman, 1996, p. 164).

Conclusion

The process of developing an identity is particularly complex for multiracial youth. Factors unique to their multiples heritages that influence the process include the need of multiracial individuals to select a personal and family identity that represents their own attitudes about interracialism, their family's way of acknowledging the components of their culture, society's historical desire to keep people of different races separate, and racism that is both common and hierarchical. In addition, as the number of multiracial individuals increases, particularly over gen-

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erations, so do the choices for classification; individuals may opt to embrace all the different ethnicities they embody, perhaps ultimately half a dozen or so; or they may seek to align themselves solely with a new group whose commonality is the multiple heritages of its members.

Because of the increasing prominence of multiracialism, such complexities should not be permitted to deter consideration of the issue, by either society in general or by the schools. Indeed, the increase in racial mixing provides an opportunity to reconsider racial issues generally, particularly as classification by race engenders prejudice and discrimination. For educators, counselors, and other children's services professionals especially, learning about and respecting the beliefs, attitudes, and concerns of interracial families is crucial. Such knowledge will enable them to help multiracial students to develop a positive self-concept and succeed in school, and to help all students understand how irrelevant racial differences really are.

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A companion digest, ***The Schooling of Multiracial Students***, presents schoolwide and classroom strategies for promoting achievement in multiracial youth and providing all students with an education about multiracialism.

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